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SUBJECT: ENERGY SITUATION WORSENS IN TAJIKISTAN

REF: A. DUSHANBE 21  
[1](#)B. DUSHANBE 121  
[1](#)C. DUSHANBE 154

Classified By: Ambassador Tracey A. Jacobson, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Sanat Rahimov, the new chair of the national electricity company Barqi Tojik, dismissed as ridiculous the notion that Tajikistan either could or should hold back water in the spring to replenish its hydroelectric reservoirs. He said Tajikistan must "live within its energy means" and not rely on its neighbors. He had made no efforts to contact his Uzbek counterparts since he was appointed 15 days ago. He said the Nurek Hydroelectric Station should have enough capacity to generate electricity through March 20, while World Bank experts say there is only enough water to last through February 20. Meanwhile, the energy situation is becoming more precarious in Tajikistan. Most parts of the capital receive energy 15 hours per day; areas outside of the capital receive only a few hours, if any. Consumption at the Talco aluminum plant has declined by 20%, though this likely owes more to the sagging world aluminum market than to altruistic concerns about limiting usage. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Econoff met with Sanat Rahimov on February 5. He began by explaining how the Central Asian energy grid, built during the Soviet era, was explicitly designed to balance agricultural and industrial needs as well as regionally varying seasonal surpluses and deficits by distributing electricity throughout the region. He boasted the system was agile enough to avoid the kinds of blackouts that had plagued the United States in years past (evidently referring to the major east coast power outage of 2003 and earlier west coast blackouts in the late 1990s). Yet the one constant refrain during the meeting was that Tajikistan must now live within its energy means and not rely at all on its neighbors. "We generate 17 billion kilowatt-hours per year. We must live on 17 billion per year. That's all there is to it."

Tajikistan Will NOT Hold Back Water in Spring

[1](#)3. (C) Rahimov dismissed as ridiculous the notion, voiced by several people in the Tajik government, including Foreign Minister Zarifi, that Tajikistan might have to hold on to water in the spring and summer to replenish its reservoirs. "Whoever said that, and I don't know who it is, clearly has no understanding of power." He said if Tajikistan held back water it would not be able to generate power or feed its agriculture. On the contrary, he said, it was in Tajikistan's interests to let the water flow to the fullest extent possible. He allowed that those saying otherwise might be "playing political games."

[1](#)4. (SBU) Rahimov noted, however, that the situation at the Kairakum Hydroelectric Station, on the Syr Darya River,

differs from Nurek. While the Vakhsh River feeding Nurek receives a relatively steady flow of water during the summer season from glacial melt, the Syr Darya is fed by snowmelt and volumes decline considerably over the course of the summer. Because of the energy crisis, the Kairakum Station is currently in power generation mode, letting water flow out of the reservoir across the turbines, when it should be in agriculture mode, accumulating water for later use during the growing season. As a result, the river leading out of the reservoir could conceivably run dry later in the year. He said that Tajik authorities have informed their Uzbek counterparts of this concern.

#### Unrealistic Expectations of Power Use

15. (C) Rahimov directly contradicted nearly unanimous reporting that the Nurek Hydroelectric Station, which supplies over three-quarters of Tajikistan's electricity, will run out of generation capacity in mid-February. Rahimov said Nurek had sufficient water in its reservoir to last until March 20 before reaching the "dead point," where the water level is too low to power the turbines. World Bank experts, however, put that moment exactly a month earlier. When asked how he could square this difference, Rahimov said the issue needed to be thought of in terms of consumption, not production. "We must work tirelessly, 24 hours a day, to change our consumption habits." He drew an analogy: an Englishman, asked how his country had such perfect lawns, responded that it must be carefully seeded, fertilized and watered. "Do this for three hundred years, and you will have a perfect lawn." He said that Tajikistan must adopt the same slow and steady approach to adjusting its consumption. When asked how this long-range strategy was going to help in winter 2009, Rahimov vaguely acknowledged that there might have to be further rationing.

16. (SBU) According to Sodyk Khaitov, an energy specialist with the World Bank, Nurek can conceivably continue to generate power at water levels three or four meters below the "dead point." Because of silt buildup along the reservoir's floor, however, the dam would be running a significant risk of a "hydraulic shock" caused by a foreign object entering the turbines. Khaitov added that power rationing had been having a significant effect on consumption. Without rationing Nurek was consuming as much as 60 cm a day from its reservoir; it now draws off between 20 and 30 cm. The country as a whole was using 62 GWh of electricity before the rationing, while it now uses closer to 30 GWh.

#### Ignores Uzbeks

17. (C) Unlike other officials in recent days, Rahimov refused to criticize Uzbekistan for Tajikistan's precarious energy situation, even though he expressed bafflement about Uzbek intentions. He declared, almost boastfully, that he had been in office for 15 days and had not once bothered trying to contact his Uzbek counterparts. When asked to speculate why Tashkent would refuse to transmit Turkmen energy to Tajikistan, Rahimov said he had no idea (refs A and B). He did say, however, that the excuse occasionally given by Uzbekistan, that the line between Turkmenistan and Tajikistan needed repairs, was patently ridiculous. The repairs the Uzbeks described, he said, "are a matter of a few hours. They've given some kind of excuse that they are having logistical difficulties getting repairs done. We've offered to send specialists, but they ignore us."

#### Talco Cuts Consumption

18. (SBU) According to some reports, as much as 50% of Tajikistan's domestically produced power is consumed by the Talco aluminum plant. The company announced in December that it would reduce its consumption by 10% in response to the energy crisis. President Rahmon then ordered Talco to cut its consumption by 35% in January, according to a press report. Khaitov said Talco had in fact cut its usage by

about 20%, from 20 Gigawatts to 16 GW; he said he expected Talco to further reduce its consumption by another Gigawatt or two, but that the process must be gradual in order not to damage the equipment. He acknowledged, though, that Talco's decision - whether voluntary or forced - to decrease consumption is much more likely a result of the sagging world aluminum market than concerns about domestic power availability. Talco's revenue was expected to fall 50% in 2009, according to World Bank country director Chiara Bronchi.

#### Expect Rate Increases

¶9. (SBU) Both the World Bank and Rahimov agreed that Tajiks pay too little for electricity. Tajiks now spend approximately 1.9 cents per kilowatt-hour, after a 25% rate hike on residential consumers in January. Drawing a comparison we have heard several times, Rahimov asked how Tajiks, who average three cellular phones per family, are comfortable spending three cents a minute on calls but are allowed to spend only a cent and a half (prior to the increase) on electricity. Revisiting his central theme, Rahimov said that Tajiks must be led to understand the value of electricity, and that meant price increases. Adducing somewhat inaccurate statistics, he said that Turkey pays 9 cents per kWh, which he said was the lowest in the world, and Qcents per kWh, which he said was the lowest in the world, and most countries pay much higher. (Note: Turkey's residential rate is in fact closer to 12 cents per kWh, but residents of many countries pay much lower. End note.)

#### World Bank Nervous about Roghun Power Politics

¶10. (C) Bronchi of the World Bank voiced some concern that power politics were taking an ominous turn in Central Asia (ref C). She said that the Bank staff in Tashkent had told her that "normal, uneducated" people in Uzbekistan are saying that if Tajikistan goes ahead with the Roghun hydroelectric project it could lead to war. While she did not think armed conflict was imminent, she did not take such information lightly. She and Khaitov said as far as they could tell the Uzbek concerns about Roghun were entirely unfounded. Khaitov said according to preliminary data, the Vakhsh River at Roghun was responsible for only 13% of the total flow of the Amu Darya River leading into Uzbekistan - meaning that, even if the Tajiks could completely cut off the flow of the Vakhsh (which they can't), it would only minimally affect downstream water levels. The theoretical ability to stop the Vakhsh flow already existed further downstream at Nurek, making the Uzbek position even harder to understand. At most, Uzbekistan would see a very small decrease in water flow during the summers as the Roghun reservoir filled over the course of 15 or 18 years. (Note: other studies quoted to us by the World Bank indicate the Vakhsh makes up 30% of the flow of the Amu Darya. It is likely the measurements are from different points along the Vakhsh. End note.)

¶11. (C) Nevertheless, the Uzbek position on Roghun had Bronchi nervous. The World Bank is underwriting three feasibility studies on Roghun - technical, environmental, and social - and any hostilities that erupted over the project could conceivably implicate the Bank. She wanted to be very certain that the Bank's role was thus very transparent and above board. She said the studies would be put out to bid later this month and hopefully contracted within 6 months (see ref C).

¶12. (C) In Bronchi's view, the world economic crisis had altered the playing field in Central Asia. Russia, which has seen its economic might rapidly diminish, was looking to shore up its sphere of influence in the region. Speaking about the recent Russian announcement of aid for Kyrgyzstan, apparently in exchange for the closure of the U.S.-run Manas Airbase, she said that the Russians might try to do something similar - such as threatening their way into Roghun. (Note: She was not deterred by the fact that the United States has few assets in Tajikistan, making the playing field rather different here. End note.)

¶13. (C) Kazakhstan has been significantly reduced in stature, as it has seen its banks nationalized and its currency devalued. In contrast, Uzbekistan finds itself stronger than ever. "Swimming" in foreign currency reserves and relatively shielded from world financial markets, it is in a position to dictate terms to its weakened neighbors. From this perspective, Bronchi thought Uzbekistan's refusal to transmit Turkmen energy to Tajikistan was little more than a provocation designed to put Tajikistan on notice about Roghun.

¶14. (C) Comment. Though the Tajiks can sound like a broken record, never tiring of expounding on their need to increase power generation, they have a point. The lack of power is a major hindrance to economic growth as well as a barrier to improving the quality of life for the population. In the short term, Tajikistan remains fully dependent on Uzbekistan for power imports. Given Uzbekistan's increasing lack of desire to cooperate, Tajikistan understandably is focused in the medium-term on developing additional power production capacity and reducing dependence on unreliable imports.

¶15. (C) Comment, continued. While Rahimov appeared genuine in his calls for energy independence, like the country's political leaders he did not broach obvious but difficult steps such as further reducing Talco's consumption, smoothing out power production more evenly over the year, or extending power rationing to Dushanbe to allow more even national distribution. He seemed unwilling to acknowledge how soon Nurek could reach its limits; even if his prediction somehow came true, the power situation would remain precarious for months.

¶16. (C) Comment, continued. Bronchi is not the only one who  
Q16. (C) Comment, continued. Bronchi is not the only one who is becoming concerned that rhetoric over water and power issues is ratcheting up and exacerbating the existing resentments among the local populations. Regardless, there is genuine bafflement here - as in much of the region - about just what Uzbekistan is after, and how they hope to achieve it with their current tactics. End comment.  
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